Email addiction leads to further social problems
the scrutineer | Bruce McCabe

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Does email access increase job performance or has it simply made staff slaves to their own inboxes? ANYWHERE, anytime is not always the best thing when it comes to email. In October, Britain's Phones 4U made headlines when it decided to ban email so staff could get back in front of customers.

Although this might have been a relatively extreme reaction (and I cannot verify if it ever successfully achieved that goal) the message was valuable: don't assume email access is good for all employees, and do consider where it might actually reduce overall job performance.

In Australia's workplaces there are plenty of scenarios where email is becoming a liability, and 2004 is a good time for many IT managers and business managers to take a long hard look at how email is used in their workplaces.

In many companies it has evolved from communications tool to de facto workflow system, whereby staff are increasingly managing their to-do list, delegations, and even entire projects from the inbox.

It has grown to play such a substantial role in their working life that, if their inboxes become unavailable for any reason, they simply cease to function.

Taken too far, "stretching" email until it becomes the centre of their workplace universe is unhealthy.

An almost universal issue is escalating volumes of internal email in corporations.

I consider receiving 80 emails a day a seriously problematic volume sufficient to turn individuals into slaves to their own inbox, and yet thousands of Australian workers receive this many and more. An underlying problem is sloppiness with respect to multi-recipient emails, senders using distribution lists and CC functions far too freely and sending correspondence to anyone they feel might "need to know" when they don't.

I call this workplace spam and in some ways it is the worst kind of spam because there is no easy way of filtering it.

We are learning, too, that over dependence on such an imperfect system as email can be dangerous.

If there is a positive side to the global virus and spam epidemics, it is how they have forced us to recognise that email can be seriously compromised, either through overwhelming volumes or through security exposures associated with malicious payloads.
Most disturbing are some of the behavioural changes associated with email dependency. We often see people habitually checking for new emails every few minutes instead of every few hours, and constantly interrupting whatever they are doing every time the bell sounds to announce a new message has arrived.

Expectations have shifted in many workplaces so one or two-day response times are no longer acceptable, replaced with an assumption that emails will be read and actioned within a few hours at most.

The idea of regularly clearing email while on holidays to avoid being paralysed by a backlog on the first day back at work seems bizarre, but many people do this as well.

Many of these behaviours appear to me to be a form of addiction, and one that brings much stress to those afflicted.

A psychologist friend of mine says a more accurate label might be impulse control disorder — when people cannot resist an impulse to perform an act that is in some way harmful to themselves or others.

Using this sort of language may be a stretch, but if employees can't help but check email so frequently that they fail to deal with other aspects of their job properly, or experience added stress because they leave less time for other tasks, then perhaps it is the best description for an uncomfortable reality.

For all these reasons, I question corporate deployments of email-specific mobile devices like the BlackBerry.

There will certainly be some job roles where enabling such access to email anywhere, anytime, is valuable, but my feeling is that in most jobs, these devices are more likely to be counterproductive, and unhealthy.

We do not help alcoholics by improving their access to alcohol; we do better by reducing intake and trying to deal with the factors that caused their affliction in the first place.

Australia's IT managers are being asked to give more employees ubiquitous access to email.

They should spend at least as much time considering which people in their organisation might benefit from reduced access to email, or even from unplugging it altogether.

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